

The First National Ecotourism Forum

October 2-5, Sofia Bulgaria

Ecotourism, Mountains and Protected Areas: Partners in Prosperity **A Report**

The Context and Goal of the Forum

This National Forum celebrated the International Year of Ecotourism and the International Year of Mountains. It was developed to capitalize on the International Ecotourism Summit of Quebec in May 2002, and was guided by the Convention on Biological Diversity and its guidelines for sustainable development. It was born of ecotourism efforts associated with Bulgarian protected areas and their conservation, and forms a key part of the national agenda for sustainable tourism development.

The goal of the Forum was to celebrate the progress made in developing an enabling environment for ecotourism in Bulgaria, and to augment our ecotourism efforts with international experience and contributions.

Hosts

The Forum was hosted by the Ministry of Environment and Waters, the Ministry of Economy, with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests.

Sponsorship

The Forum was sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Bulgaria, and was managed on behalf of USAID by Associates in Rural Development, ARD, Inc., under the Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Growth Project.

Financial Support

Financial support for the Forum was received from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Swiss Development Agency (SDC), the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), University of Delaware/FLAG- (USAID), the World Bank, and the Radisson SAS Hotel.

Strong Political Support

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria Mr. Simeon Saxe Coburg-Gotha, opened the forum.

Additional support for a Bulgarian ecotourism agenda was demonstrated with speeches of the Minister of Environment and Water Ms. Dolores Arssenova, the Minister of Agriculture and Forests, Mr. Mehmed Dikme; and Deputy Minister of Economy, Mr. Dimiter Hadjinikolov.

Representing the US Ambassador to Bulgaria, Mr. Roderick W. Moore – Deputy Chief of Mission, provided strong U.S. Government endorsement for Bulgaria’s ecotourism efforts and opportunities.

Deputy Ministers Fatme Iliaz, MOEW, Meglena Plougchieva, MOAF, Dimiter Hadjinikolov, MOE, and Deputy Minister of Culture, Bissera Yosifova each moderated a key session of the Forum. Additional sessions were moderated by: the Foundation for Local Government Reform, Andrei Goranov; by Lubomir Popyordanov, Chairman of the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism; and by Ilian Komitski, on behalf of the UD/FLAG consortium.

Leaders in International Ecotourism

The following international organizations were represented at the Forum, and their representatives presented key note addresses: the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the PanParks Network, and The George Washington University School of Business and Public Management (GWU).

Events of the Ecotourism Forum

Event A Two days conference, including sessions on:

- Ecotourism Planning and Policy
- Ecotourism Legislation, Regulation & Institutional Frameworks
- Product Development, Marketing and Promotion of Ecotourism
- Monitoring Costs and Benefits of Ecotourism
- National and Southeastern Europe Ecotourism Network Development
- Protected Area Ecotourism Competitive Cluster
- Ecotourism Market Intelligence
- Financing Ecotourism

Each of the sessions included presentations of international keynote speakers, two regional and two national speakers, followed by discussion.

Registered Participants in the conference – 227

Bulgarian Participants	182
International Participants	45

Bulgarian Participants

Bulgarian Participants from Sofia	99
Participants from other Destinations in Bulgaria	83

International Participants

International Participants: Regional	15
International Participants: Other Countries in Europe	18
International Participants: USA	10
International Participants: Other Countries	2

Countries Represented - 17, Albania, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Germany, Spain, Canada, Latvia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, USA, Slovenia, France, Holland, Croatia, Czech Republic.

Representation: Type of Institutions/Organizations/Companies

Institution/Organization/Company Represented	# Participants
Government	41
National Parks; Nature Parks; Protected Areas	30
International Organizations	14
Projects	26
Local Communities	34
Professional Associations	8
NGOs	19
Consultants; Scientific Institutes; R&D	14
Banks & Investors	9
Private Companies	25
Private Citizens	7

Participants by position in the organization

Decision Makers	82
Experts; Managers; Specialists; Technical Staff; etc.	90
Consultants & Researchers	48
Observers /Position Not Specified/; Others	7

Event B Ecotourism Fair

The Forum was complemented by an Ecotourism Fair in the National Assembly Square, and was located in front of the Hotel Radisson. Three pavilions accommodated 49 exhibitors from the whole country. Exhibits presented ecotourism products and services available for clients and tour-operators.

The Fair enjoyed good weather, and was visited by dignitaries and hundreds of Sofia residents.

Exhibitors - 49

From Sofia	15
From other Cities	21
From Smaller Towns & Villages	13

Type of Organization/Institution/Company

Governmental Institutions & Public Organizations	4
National Parks, Nature Parks, Protected Areas	19
Local Communities	12
Projects	3
Professional Associations	3
NGOs	3
Commercial Participants	5

Event C Ecotourism Project Innovation Awards

With USAID support, 12 ecotourism project innovation awards were conferred at the end of Forum. These awards were drawn from a competition among some 70 ecotourism projects, spread throughout the country. The goal of this competition was to stimulate public-private sector ecotourism links between protected areas and local communities.

Evaluation criteria included the degree to which proposals:

- focused on local, natural assets in protected areas;
- demonstrated protection and conservation of these resources as a priority;
- showed potential for education and interpretation;
- could demonstrate the potential for increasing incomes and improving local livelihoods;

20 finalists were selected from among the 69 applicants by an inter-ministerial technical team. Finalists were invited to prepare and present project posters for the Forum. 20 innovation project concepts were presented in a novel fashion in the lobby of the Forum's public area.

Three Deputy Ministers, USAID, and Professor Donald Hawkins formed a "Blue Ribbon" panel of judges and each voted their preference. The 12 poster concepts sporting the most votes were declared winners.

Awardees will each receive a cash amount of 2000 BGL (\$1000 USD), that will serve to develop their project concepts into full proposals. Final project proposals are expected by end of 2002.

The Ambassador of USA to Bulgaria, Hon. James Pardew, presented the awards to ecotourism innovation project generators. He expects to participate in the final presentation of these project concepts at the end of January 2003.

◆ Innovative Ecotourism Project Applications – 69

- Parks and local authority - 14
- NGOs - 45
- Private business – 7
- Academic institutions - 3

◆ Nominated Project Concepts - 20

- Parks and local authorities - 5
- NGOs - 12
- Private business - 3

◆ Awarded Projects - 12

- Parks – 3
- NGOs – 9

A Commitment to Closer Working Ties

The Ecotourism Forum witnessed an important testimony to Government collaboration on making ecotourism a reality. A *Protocol of Collaboration* was signed by the Ministers of Environment and Water, the Economy, and the Minister of Agriculture and Forests. Three Deputy Ministers witnessed the exchange of the Protocol at a special ceremony.

The Protocol announces the intention of the three ministries to initiate sustainable institutional mechanism for the finalization and implementation of the National Ecotourism Strategy. They also agree to support wide public dialogue regarding the development of ecotourism in the country. They signify that ecotourism and sustainable tourism are priority economic branches, which have significant importance for the socio-economic development in Bulgaria's regions and small communities.

The Protocol provides for cooperative efforts for national and international marketing, attraction of investments, and the establishment of sustainable financial mechanisms for ecotourism development.

Through their Protocol, the three Ministries agree to establish and institutionalize a working group of the ministries for the finalization of the National Ecotourism Strategy.

The National Ecotourism Strategy (NES)

The First draft of the National Strategy for Ecotourism was presented at the Forum. It was developed by a working group established under the Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Growth (BCEG) Project, and with USAID funding. The working group includes experts from the three ministries, national and regional tourism associations, information centers, NGOs working in the field of nature conservation and regional ecotourism development. It has 16 members.

This draft national ecotourism strategy is developed at the request of the Ministry of Economy and with the support of the international consultant of the BCEG Project, Prof. Donald Hawkins.

The keynote speakers and the participants in the Ecotourism Forum offered many important recommendations. Using the results of the Forum, the working group and international experts joined in an intensive workshop setting to examine the strategy, and to improve upon its content. The next draft of the NES is expected by the end of November. It will receive another, more expansive review, by additional national and regional stakeholders in February, 2003.

Making News and Keeping the Public Informed

The Media Coverage associated with the Forum resulted in more than two hours of TV broadcasts, two and half-hours of radio broadcasts and over 60 published articles. The Event – both Forum and Fair, was widely covered by all central media. Broadcasts and articles continue and are supportive and positive about the opportunities afforded for Bulgaria by pursuing an ecotourism agenda.

- Journalists accredited to the Forum Press Center - 55
- Media represented at the Forum - 32 (Central Media - 20, Specialized Publications - 12)
- Journalists subscribed to receive e-mailed information from the Forum - 79

Statements of the International Experts in Ecotourism

Here's what the experts have to say about Ecotourism, Bulgaria, and the Ecotourism Event:

Oliver Hillel

Tourism Program Coordinator

United Nations Environment Program

As one of Europe's last biodiversity hotspots, Bulgaria is well positioned to grow into a model for European ecotourism: it has an established tourism industry in Sofia and the Black Sea coast, it has hospitable people rooted in an amazing culture and history, it has fascinating historical, religious and natural attractions in its coast, mountains, rivers and lakes. The protected area system, and the recently announced Park Fund, will constitute the backbone of a successful ecotourism industry. The Bulgarian initiative to develop a national ecotourism strategy, which the ministries of Environment and Water, Agriculture and Forestry, and Economy have jointly committed to support, is an important proactive move to position this amazing country as a reference for Europe, and globally. UNEP looks forward to continue to support this initiative, and the Bulgarian Government, in its efforts towards sustainable development.

Prof. Dr. Donald Hawkins

George Washington University

Washington D.C.

Ecotourism consultant for Bulgaria

Bulgaria can lead the way forward by developing well-funded protected area management system linked to quality ecotourism products in surrounding communities. A National Ecotourism Strategy holds great potential to improve livelihoods and stimulate prosperity in Bulgaria's rural areas. An ecotourism strategy linking Bulgaria to the Balkan Region could be an effective re-positioning strategy to attract niche markets from major market generating countries.

Sylvie Blangy

Consultant in ecotourism and sustainable tourism

TIES (International Ecotourism Society)

Bulgaria is the first Eastern European country to have achieved the goal of drafting and disseminating a national ecotourism strategy in its country. Apart from Australia in 95 (ecotourism national conference), I am not aware of any other large consultation like the one you initiated 2 weeks ago.

The challenges are ahead, though. How to circulate the strategy, how to enrich and incorporate what has been said at the Forum level? How to apply the strategy in all fields of the industry? How to translate the national strategy into charters, guidelines, standards and certification schemes at the regional level or by corporations (guides, huts, hotels, activities, and services.)?

To be an international player... Yes. It depends on your ability in applying, translating, influencing other sectors of the economy with it. Bulgaria for sure will draw a lot of the attention in communicating around the strategy. This is an excellent media tool. Bulgaria will serve as an example if they are able to play the role of a coordinator with neighboring countries and other Eastern European countries. Bulgaria can play a leading role by initiating cross border projects and trans-boundary partnership, theme roads, Joint parks.

Gabor Vereczi
World Tourism Organization
Sustainable Development of Tourism Section
Program Coordinator

It was an interesting experience participating at the Bulgarian National Forum. On my return I wrote a Memo on the results of the event that I sent to the Secretary General, Mr. Yunis (head of my Section), to the WTO Regional Representative for Europe and the Representative for CIS countries as well. We have circulated the first edition of the WTO Sustainable Development of Tourism e-bulletin last week, in which the Bulgarian Forum is mentioned with link to your website. This electronic newsletter was sent to about 8000 readers worldwide in three languages.

I could say briefly about the ecotourism development in Bulgaria: Bulgaria has certainly a good potential for ecotourism development, considering its rich natural and cultural heritage. Europe is not just an important generating market for ecotourism, but also a prime ecotourism destination region, within which Central and Eastern European countries are on the rise, according to the WTO market studies. The position of Bulgaria in the global and European ecotourism market place will depend on a number of factors, among them the ability to develop adequate infrastructure for the access of sites and ecotourism related services, integrate ecotourism with other tourism segments (like coastal or cultural tourism) and with wider development programs, organize the operators and service providers that are mostly small or micro and fragmented into consistent ecotourism products, as well as institutionalizing the participatory process for the development and implementation of the National Ecotourism Strategy. This process has been already started, with a good and strong start, where the first background studies have been already completed, the open dialogue have been initiated through the National Forum and the multistakeholder working group for the National Strategy, pilot projects and good practice examples have been identified and even recognized with awards, and with the three participating Ministries signed an official agreement for cooperation in ecotourism development, demonstrating a clear commitment.

The Bulgarian National Ecotourism Strategy process is an outstanding case for inter-ministerial and inter-sectorial cooperation, policymaking and strategic ecotourism planning with a participatory process. It could be considered by other Eastern-European Countries, as well as by CIS Countries as a good example to adapt.

Dr. Brian White
World Travel and Tourism Council
Director of the Center for Tourism Leadership

I do believe that Bulgaria can serve as an excellent model of development in ecotourism, and I think the broader category of sustainable tourism is even more appropriate because of the very rich cultural heritage of Bulgaria. CIS countries would do well to consider Bulgaria's approach and achievements to date. The increasing uncertainty of international travel to ecotourism and cultural tourism destinations in South East Asia and elsewhere offers an opportunity for Bulgaria to capitalize on its emerging image as a safe destination. Regional branding could be nearly equally important to national branding. The regional ecotourism/community/cultural opportunities are very strong and could be more emphasized in Western European and North American markets. As Sophia upgrades its heritage buildings and cultural attractions, 'gateway and cluster' theming can become a strong component of Bulgaria's destination appeal. Marketing to specialty associations and clubs (Birders, Botanists, etc.) has very significant potential.

The National Ecotourism Strategy is moving towards the implementation phase and the level of stakeholder awareness is good- also very multi-level with a strong focus on communities and protected areas. The diverse regional and community-based tourism product that is developing is a great strength if a flexible and well-supported organizational network and education/information structure can be put in place. The cooperation of the Ministries is particularly commendable, because so many initiatives that assume a high level of common ownership and cooperation come apart when the institutional arrangements are negotiated. From my perspective, roads, accommodation, and visitor information services require the most careful attention in the next planning phase to increase competitive advantage.

To conclude, the National Ecotourism Strategy is unfolding as an well-integrated policy and planning initiative that has built a firm foundation for the forthcoming implementation phase. General agreements on operational policy between government ministries, community, and tourism industry stakeholders will ensure that the Strategy will fulfill its promise on the ground as well as in its intentions.

Niek Beunders
PAN Parks Network

Bulgaria will probably be one of the first European nations with a National Ecotourism Strategy supported (and implemented) by three Ministries.

For the success of the Strategy it will be important to integrate it with both national and international strategies for Biodiversity and the National Tourism Strategy. A financial blueprint is a must for the National Strategy and its implementation. It is still important to formulate concrete targets on the ecological, economic and social impacts of eco-tourism at level of Protected areas, regions and national level. Ecotourism should have tangible net benefits for all these interests! Formulate clear guidelines for visitor management strategies in all protected areas. And formulate clear guidelines on the development and implementation of regional ecotourism strategies. Please remember to collaboration with other international initiatives: e.g. Large Herbivore and Large Carnivore Initiative, PAN Parks, EU-policy on biodiversity protection etc.

Thank you for this stimulating conference and the high quality of your hospitality!. and of course the enthusiasm and the motivation of the wide range of Bulgarian participants.

Arthur Pedersen
UNESCO
World Heritage Center

One of the key results of the conference was to showcase the efforts made by Bulgaria to develop its protected areas and link them to an increasing active private sector interested in tourism products geared to environmental and cultural attractions. These forward looking advances represent a marked change from the past and the culmination of much effort carried out by a dedicated group of Bulgarians supported by government and international aid agencies, notably USAID.

The creation of a Bulgarian ecotourism strategy is useful in a number of practical ways and provides several lessons learned.

- 1. The development of the strategy seems to have been an effective focal point for garnering stakeholder support and educating people about the newer and different specialty markets. In the past Bulgaria tourism has focused on the Black Sea and a few mountain resorts.*
- 2. It has played a role in the development of relationships between protected area staff and the private tourism sector. This relationship is many times difficult, in many counties collaboration is problematic, and the development of the strategy has provided a purpose and a point for mutual understanding and action.*
- 3. In an era of government decentralization, the development of the ecotourism strategy has helped to support important environmental groups. This reinforces and helps to balance power to counter unreasonable a tourism development, positively influencing powerful local interests not always concerned with conserving the resource, the tourism attraction that is the very tourism product.*
- 4. An ecotourism strategy leading to a general sustainable tourism policy for the country shows other countries in the region that there are alternative ways of developing tourism. The fact that the action is receiving the support of national leaders and the international community gives the effort further credibility.*